

# **Counselor or Educators: Strengthening the Professional Identity of School Counselors**

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Jane M. Webber, Ph.D., LPC  
[jwebber@monmouth.edu](mailto:jwebber@monmouth.edu)

Dr. Webber is Assistant Professor, School Counseling, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ. She is a member of the ACA Public Policy and Awareness Committee and a Past-Chair of the American Counseling Association Foundation (ACAF). Her research has included the effects of 9/11 on counselors, and school counselor identity.

J. Barry Mascari, Ed.D. LPC, LCADC  
[jmascari@kean.edu](mailto:jmascari@kean.edu)

Dr. Mascari is an Assistant Professor, Counselor Education, at Kean University, Union, NJ. He is President-Elect, American Association of State Counseling Boards (AASCB), and Chair of the State of New Jersey Professional Counselor Examiners Committee. His research has included licensing standards, violations, and counselor identity issues.

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Are school counselors primarily counselors working in a school setting or educators using counseling skills? Although school counselors have historically addressed role ambiguity and role conflict, debate regarding the counselor's role in educational reform has only recently split leaders into two philosophically and professionally divergent positions. (Brown & Kraus, 2003; Stone, 2003). Since roles and job descriptions are expressions or badges of one's professional identity, do we know who we are?

The counseling profession has taken multiple steps in establishing a strong identity. Local, state and national school counseling initiatives promoted the counselor identity of counselors in our schools (Runte, Mascari, & Lukach, 1991). Standards of the Council on Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) strengthened and systematized the goals of graduate training programs.

Professional counselor licensure is tied to the National Counselor Examination and CACREP standards in many states. School counselor identity was firmly established as a specialty of counseling.

Influences outside the profession have also targeted school counselor roles. The Education Trust focused efforts to revise counselor education programs for the purpose of training “new vision school counselors” in skills to help close the achievement gap. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) expanded its educational recognition process to school counselors in addition to the already existing National Certified School Counselor credential offered by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC). However, these two credentials are fundamentally different in professional identity.

### **School Counselor Professional Identity**

Although there is extensive research on school counseling roles and responsibilities throughout its history, researchers rarely asked school counselors about their professional identity. In a study by Webber (2004), 247 school counselors in New Jersey were asked to describe their professional identity. More than half of the participants were 50 years of age or older and the majority worked in suburban high schools. The study found that 78% described themselves as “a counselor working in a school setting,” and 18% identified themselves as “an educator using counselor skills.” More than three fourths identified themselves as counselors rather than educators.

The majority (58%) reported using a school counseling program model. Of these, more than half followed a locally developed model (27.5%) or implemented a New Jersey model (26%), and 28% did not use a model. According to how counselors spent time, the first and second ranked job functions (combined) were: 88% paperwork/noncounseling; 64% academic counseling 49% personal counseling; 44% career and college planning; 23% classroom guidance; and 7% crisis intervention. Qualitative comments were positive and included: “I’m the only counselor in four schools but I’d never trade my job;” and “My principal really appreciates me as a counselor;” “All our counselors came together. It helped everyone especially the ones who were burned out;” and “I never had time for group counseling before,” and “Too much paperwork.” Although the study has limited generalization, a randomized national study could provide a broader picture of perceptions of counselor identity.

In a second study, Mascari (2005) collected qualitative data from school counselors representing 33 New Jersey schools representing a cross-section of counties and demographics. This study found a wide range

of caseloads and use of counselor time. Almost 40% of counselor time was spent in non-counseling duties, and 11% indicated that their district had a developmental program. The large percentages of non-counseling duties in both studies suggest that, despite the progress of school counseling initiatives to refocus counselor roles, others, rather than counselors, continue largely to define counselors' duties.

Although counselors adjust their programs to meet the changing needs of students, threats to the counseling profession may increase when roles are added to meet political or administrative agenda. In the ASCA National Model (2003), Myrick stated, "History shows that unless the role of the school counselor is clearly established, the whims of the times can threaten the very existence of the counselor position" (p. 6). The farther school counselors move from the mainstream of counseling and counseling associations, and the less they define themselves by their professional training and expertise, the more they will look and act like educators, administrators, and teachers, rather than counselors.

In 2004, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) strengthened counselor professional identity substantially revising certification requirements. The old "Student Personnel Services" certificate was changed to the new "School Counselor" certificate; the 36-credit requirement was increased to 48 credits and aligned with CACREP standards; and teaching certification and experience requirements were eliminated. Graduates of CACREP accredited programs are automatically certified as school counselors.

### **Accountability and Counselor Autonomy**

Accountability is a critical element of professional identity in state and national models with program evaluation conducted by school counselors rather than external stakeholders or institutions. Anderson (2002) cautioned that "it is haphazard and irresponsible to leave accountability and evaluation solely in the hands of those who do not understand the counselor's role in student achievement and do not have the expertise to determine when/how the counselor's goals are accomplished" (p. 319). Training and professional development and for counselors are optimally conducted by counselor educators and counseling associations including ASCA and ACA because the National Education Association and state education associations focus their agenda on teachers. At a recent New Jersey Education Association convention, only two sessions were for school counselors.

Historically school counselors have struggled with multiple role expectations and conflicting demands by stakeholders. Compared with the strong professional identity, standards, and consistent job descriptions of

school psychologists and school social workers, school counselor roles often vary according to school or administrator (Schmidt & Ciechalski, 2001). Principals and teachers maintain distinct job descriptions and role statements through strong professional associations, training standards, and unions.

In a Point Counterpoint column in *Counseling Today*, Brown and Kraus (2003) emphasized, “Foremost we believe that school counselors are counseling professionals who, through further training, specialize to meet the needs of school students, preschool through college” (p. 14). Stone (2003) identified herself first as an educator, stating that “the 15-year debate about our identity reminds me of the adage, ‘If the horse dies, get off.’” With this dilemma, counselors appear to have what the authors call Multiple Professional Identity Disorder. If we are not counselors, what profession defines our work? Teaching? Administration? In a new text, Stone and Dahir (2006) emphasized that “counseling, the term that defines our profession, is preeminent in the work of school counselors” and “the key indicator of one’s professional identity” (p. 64). The debate then may not be about philosophy but semantics with the language changing as national issues also change?

The ASCA National Model clearly states that counselors do not do therapy. Brown and Trusty (2005) observed, “The rationale for employing school counselors has often been their ability to provide mental health services to students and adolescents, and even the most casual observer realizes that students need these services” (p.12). They caution that if school counselors move from the direct service role, psychologists, social workers, and outside mental health providers are ready to fill the void.

Transformed counselor roles overlap those of administrators and teachers. However, research suggested that the focus on data and whole school and system change is not shared by the majority of counselors and principals (Perusse, Goodnough, Donnegan, & Jones, 2004). Rather than fewer distinct roles, the transformed school counselor focus adds more roles, further blurring distinctions between counselors, principals, and teachers. Credentialing also has two camps: CACREP and NBCC promote counselor identity, and NBTS promotes school counselors as educators first. In fact, NBTS certification does not require a master’s degree. If counselor roles do not remain distinct from those of classroom teachers and administrators, counselor jobs could be at risk of being filled by other mental health professionals and even teachers. While the authors believe we could have become outstanding principals or superintendents, we chose the professional identity of counselors and counseling supervisors.

School counseling programs in the schools where we worked were highly effective, and had visionary initiatives that advocated for success for all students, especially the underserved or invisible in the system. These programs evolved as student and societal needs changed. Same challenges, new vocabulary?

### **A Unique Professional Identity**

Consider the differences in roles: the teacher's role is didactic, subject-based, and evaluative. The administrator evaluates, judges, manages, and disciplines. The counselor's role is facilitative, nonjudgmental, confidential, goal-oriented, and change-focused. Besides eliminating obstacles to academic success, school counselors provide counseling and respond to problems such as suicide, sudden death, drug and alcohol abuse, and physical and sexual abuse. Added to this daunting list are tragedies and disasters--school shootings, hurricanes, and terrorist threats-- where the counselor is one of a handful, or the only mental health professional trained to intervene in school. Still, much of our day is focused on counseling students and helping them improve their skills, plan for college and work, and pass their courses. Dahir and Stone (2005) state, "Not to be confused with advising, or guidance or therapy, counseling is the most significant component of the school counseling program, and the one by which the counselor's professional identity often is established" (p. 31). Same vision and identity? Or different?

Using a School Enhancement-Advocacy Model, we can continue to strengthen counselor identity, clarify roles, and reduce the risk of counselors being replaced by professionals with duplicate roles:

1. By developing job descriptions reflecting our unique counseling knowledge, dispositions, and skills. School counselors are part of the educational leadership team but are not add-ons to teacher job descriptions.
2. By clearly defining our professional roles and boundaries when we collaborate on multilevel transdisciplinary teams with teachers, social workers, student assistance counselors, and school psychologists.
3. By developing counseling programs that reach all students based on local needs assessments. Culturally competent school counselors are uniquely trained to advocate removing barriers that hold back underserved and marginalized students.
4. By advocating for our professional future through involvement in professional counseling associations. As Stroh (2004) concluded "A strong and consistent professional identity based on an affiliation with professional counseling associations is a necessary factor in this effort for counselor role clarification and contribution" (p. 4).

### **The Future: Resolving the Identity Question**

School counselors need to move to the next level of professional identity attained by school social workers, school psychologists, teachers and principals. Schmidt and Ciechalski (2001) caution, “ If no school counselors were employed, could teachers and other school personnel help students meet the standards that have been developed?” (p. 332). Are school counselors “indispensable”?

Movements influencing school counseling’s drift away from the mainstream of the counseling profession into a separate educational profession, rather than a counseling specialty, may serve to further obfuscate school counselor roles and identity. Rather than strengthening the professional identity of counselors, whose training and skills can make a difference for all students, these reforms may lead to the unintended consequence of seeing other professionals take a place we have fought for decades to establish (Brown & Trusty, 2005).

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